THE 2032 ULTIMATUM

Chronicle of the Pax Eurasiatica

THE 2032 ULTIMATUM....1
PROLOGUE: THE SILENCE OF WASHINGTON....3
CHAPTER 1: THE CHILDREN OF FRANCE....5
CHAPTER 2: THE WASHINGTON NOTE....9
CHAPTER 3: THE BEAR AWAKENS....13
CHAPTER 4: THE FINGER ON THE BUTTON....17
CHAPTER 5: THE NECESSARY BETRAYAL....21
CHAPTER 6: THE EUROPEAN WINTER....25
CHAPTER 7: THE PHOENIX PLAN....29
CHAPTER 8: THE SUN OF CADARACHE....32
CHAPTER 9: SHADOWS OF PEACE....36
CHAPTER 10: THE SOUTHERN EXTENSION....40
CHAPTER 11: THE STEEL DRAGON....44
CHAPTER 12: QUEBEC'S CALL....48
CHAPTER 13: THE RED LINE....52
CHAPTER 14: THE DIGITAL CITADEL....56
CHAPTER 15: PAX EURASIATICA....60
EPILOGUE: THE RED PASSPORT....63

PROLOGUE: THE SILENCE OF WASHINGTON

January 14, 2032
Washington D.C., United States.
11:45 PM, local time.
Rain lashed against the bulletproof windows of the White House's West Wing, engulfing the nation's capital in a gray, icy haze. For Admiral Henri de Castries, head of the French military mission to the United States, this downpour eerily resembled a funeral.

He had not been received in the Oval Office. Nor even in the*Situation Room*No, the interview had taken place in a side room, almost anonymous, with National Security Advisor Thomas Wayne. No coffee, no protocol, no diplomatic smiles. Just two tired men who had known each other for twenty years and who knew that the world had just shifted.

Wayne stood by the unlit fireplace, a navy blue folder in his hand. He hadn't opened it once. He didn't need to.

“You can’t do that, Tom,” said Henri, breaking a silence that had lasted for an interminable minute. “Not now. The Russians have amassed three hundred thousand troops on the Polish border. Kyiv is on its last legs. If you withdraw the Mediterranean carrier strike group, it’s a green light for Moscow.”

The American sighed, a heavy, weary sound. He placed the file on the mahogany coffee table.

"This isn't a withdrawal, Henri. It's a redeployment. Taiwan has been under blockade for three days. Our satellites are seeing silo movements in North China. The President has been clear: we can't be everywhere."

"Europe is going to fall," the French Admiral said in a flat voice.

Wayne finally turned towards him. His gaze was cold, devoid of the usual compassion of former allies.

— Europe had a choice, Henri. Six months ago, in Geneva, Putin proposed a freeze on borders and neutrality in the Black Sea. We were ready to sign. Who refused? Who cried moral betrayal? Berlin. Warsaw. Brussels. They wanted to play tough without having the ammunition to last three days.

— They were counting on you.

— That was their mistake. The American taxpayer will not pay for Germany's pride. The Atlantic has become a museum, Henry. Our future is in the Pacific.

Wayne approached and lowered his voice, as if sharing a confidence that should never have crossed these walls.

— Here is the unofficial ultimatum. Deliver it to the Élysée Palace, and only to the Élysée Palace. You have seventy-two hours to convince your European partners to accept the Russian conditions. If you fail, if Europe chooses war... we will not come. Article 5 is dead tonight.

Henri de Castries felt a shiver run down his spine. He saw again the faces of the European diplomats, their certainties, their impassioned speeches about "values" and "inevitable victory." They were sleepwalkers marching towards the precipice.

"And what about France?" asked Henri. "If everything collapses?"

The American extended his hand to him, a final gesture of farewell.

— France has always known how to survive, my friend. You have the Bomb. You have an army. The others... God help them.

The Admiral stepped out into the pouring rain without opening his umbrella. His diplomatic car was waiting for him. As he sat down in the back seat, he took out his secure phone. He dialed an encrypted number, a direct line to the Ministry of the Armed Forces in Paris.

He thought of his children. He thought of the thousands of young soldiers stationed in Romania and Estonia. He thought of the sentence he was about to utter, the one that would sign the death warrant of a civilization.

— Hello, Mr. Minister? This is De Castries... They're abandoning us. It's over. Prepare yourselves.

In the Washington night, the lights of the Capitol seemed to flicker. The era of the West had just ended. The age of fire was about to begin.

CHAPTER 1: THE CHILDREN OF FRANCE

January 15, 2032
Paris, Balard (Ministry of the Armed Forces).
06:00, local time.
Paris was not waking up; it seemed to be painfully emerging from a nightmare of stone and mist. A fine, icy rain, like tears of steel, lashed the immense slopes of the Balard complex. Seen from the sky, the complex was no longer a simple administrative building, but a white fortress standing sentinel on the edge of the ring road, a last bastion of reason against the madness that rumbled at the world's borders.

On the sixth basement level, far from the eyes of men, the air tasted of electrical dust and heavy secrets. This was the Operations Planning and Command Center (CPCO).

Marc Sévénié, the Minister of the Armed Forces, abruptly slammed down the red security receiver. The direct line to the Élysée Palace had just been cut. His knuckles were white.

"He hesitates," he blurted out, his voice trembling with suppressed rage.

General Pierre Valéry, Chief of the Defence Staff, was standing near the digital map where the red tide of Russian troops was massing on the Polish border. He turned to the Minister.

— The President?

— Montaigne is afraid, Pierre. He talks about "diplomatic delaying tactics." He thinks we can still calm things down with sanctions and sweet words. He doesn't see that Berlin is already loading its guns. If France shows the slightest sign of weakness now, the Russians will advance all the way to the Atlantic.

Sévénié approached the map, staring at the red dots as if he wanted to burn them away with the force of his will. He was a "hawk," a man convinced that only a show of force could preserve peace. For him, war was not an end in itself, but the threat of war was the only remaining tool.

"Did De Castries confirm the American withdrawal?" Valéry asked.

— Article 5 died last night. We are alone. That is why I must speak tonight.

— The President forbade it?

He told me: "No provocation, Marc. Don't add fuel to the fire."

Sévénié gave a bitter laugh.

"He's mistaken. The fire is already there. If I don't tell the French what's happening, they'll wake up tomorrow under a hail of bombs thinking it's just a drill. I have to shatter their complacency. I have to frighten them to bring them back together. If Moscow sees that

France is ready to bleed, Putin will hesitate. It's our only chance of deterrence."

— Or else," said Valéry softly, "you will start the fire you want to put out."

Sévénié adjusted his tie in front of the dark reflection of a bulletproof window.

— It's a risk I'm taking. Prepare the talking points. I want it to be brutal. Real. No beating around the bush.

8:00 p.m.
TF1 Television News Set.
The atmosphere on set was electric. Marc Sévénié, his face grave, faced the star presenter. He knew that backstage at the Élysée Palace, Adrien Montaigne must be glued to his screen, his teeth clenched, praying that his Minister would remain composed.

Sévénié had no intention of being measured. He wanted to be clear-sighted.

"Minister," the journalist began, "Europe is holding its breath. Rumors of mobilization are circulating. Will France join the 'Grand Coalition for Freedom' that Berlin is calling for?"

Sévénié took a breath. He looked at the camera. He wanted to awaken the French lion, to prick its pride and prepare it for battle.

— Madam, for thirty years we lived in a garden, protected by walls that others kept for us. We believed that History was over, that peace was our due. Tonight, I have come to tell you that the walls have fallen.

The silence on the set thickens.

— The time for diplomatic illusions is over. In the East, it is not a police operation that is being prepared, but a high-intensity conflict. A brutal, industrial war, the likes of which we have not seen since 1945.

He leaned forward, his eyes searching through the screen to take in every citizen.

— Our German and Polish allies speak of a swift victory. They speak of a moral crusade. But war is not about morality. It is a test of strength. And if France decides to enter this inferno to maintain its standing, I will not lie to you about the price to be paid.

This was the moment. The shocking phrase. The one that was supposed to serve as a patriotic jolt.

— We are not talking about distant drones or sanctions. We are talking about iron and fire. If we choose war, France must, starting tonight, accept the terrible idea of**losing one's children**.

The journalist staggered, her face pale.

— Losing one's... children?

“A generation,” Sévénié insisted, implacable. “That’s the price of freedom in the face of an empire that will stop at nothing. Are you prepared to pay that price? Because if we are not, then we have already lost.”

Sévénié remained silent. He thought he had issued a Churchillian appeal, a challenge to national bravery. He thought he had laid the foundations for deterrence by will.

He didn't know he had just pulled the pin on a grenade in the middle of a crowd.

8:45 p.m. Behind the scenes of the set.

Sévenié left the studio, exhausted but satisfied. He had told the truth. He had treated the French like adults.

His press attaché, a normally phlegmatic young graduate of the École Nationale d'Administration (ENA), ran towards him. He was sweating, his phone trembling in his hand.

— Mr. Minister... This is... This is a catastrophe.

— What? The Russians have reacted?

— No. The French.

The attaché handed him a tablet. The information banners scrolled by in bright red, hysterical.

BREAKING NEWS: PANIC ON ASIAN MARKETS AFTER SEVENIE'S SPEECH.
CAC 40 FUTURES: -12% IN TEN MINUTES.
RUSH ON ATMS: QUEUES FORM OUTSIDE BANKS IN PARIS AND LYON.
#WAR #FLIGHT: THE HASHTAG AT THE HEAD OF GLOBAL TRENDS.
— What is this? stammered Sévénié.

— People aren't holding back courage, sir. They're holding back "Losing their children." They're panicking. The servers at BNP and Société Générale crashed under the influx of connections. People are emptying their accounts. Gold is flying off the shelves. It's a*bank run* national en direct.

Sévénié's phone rang. A shrill, priority ring. The screen displayed:**PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC**.

Sévénié picked up the phone slowly. Adrien Montaigne's voice was not that of a war leader. It was that of a man who saw the ground giving way beneath his feet.

"Did you see, Marc?" the President yelled, his voice distorted by anguish. "Did you see what you did?"

— I wanted to prepare them... I wanted to show our resolve...

— You have terrified the country! I'm getting reports of massive traffic jams on the outskirts of Paris. People are fleeing to the countryside! The economy has ground to a halt, do you hear? Completely halted! How do you expect me to declare war tomorrow if my own people are collapsing financially and morally tonight?

— Mr. President, it's a knee-jerk reaction, it will subside, we must hold the line...

"There's no more line!" Montaigne interrupted. "You wanted to dissuade Putin? You've just shown him we're a house of cards. Go back to Balard and be quiet. I have to call the Governor of the Bank of France before a riot breaks out."

The line cut out.

Marc Sévénié remained alone in the cold corridor, the silent telephone in his hand. He had wanted to be Clemenceau. He had only been a harbinger of doom.

He looked out the studio window. In the pouring rain, car headlights already formed endless red rivers on the ring road. The exodus had begun. France wasn't going to fight. It was too afraid of losing what little it had left.

The ultimatum had begun, and France had just blinked its eyes.

CHAPTER 2: THE WASHINGTON NOTE

January 16, 2032
Brussels, The Berlaymont.
The Council of the Blind.
Brussels was not a stone fortress like Paris. It was a city of glass and steel, a transparent cathedral erected to the glory of reason, norms, and consensus. But that night, battered by the north wind, the immense windows of the thirteenth floor seemed dangerously thin, a flimsy membrane between the hushed warmth of the offices and the storm raging outside.

In the Shadow Room—an oval, soundproofed room, cut off from civilian networks—the air was air-conditioned, sterile, almost clinical. Seven people sat around the black wooden table. Seven decision-makers who didn't break a sweat.

Admiral Henri de Castries, representing France, sat apart. He wasn't looking at his counterparts; he was looking at his secure smartwatch. It vibrated against his wrist. A single, discreet pulse. An encrypted message coming directly from the Élysée Palace bunker:

"PRESIDENTIAL ORDER: SIGN NOTHING. PROMISE NOTHING. ASSESS THEIR MENTAL STATE. IMMEDIATE REPORT."

De Castries tapped the screen to acknowledge receipt and looked up. He observed the German Chancellor, Erika von Hollen. She wasn't trembling. She wasn't crying. She was consulting graphs on her tablet with the precision of a financial auditor examining a bankruptcy. Beside her, the Polish Minister, Marek Kowalski, smiled contemptuously, like a man waiting for a fight he's sure to win.

The heavy door opened. Thomas Wayne, Washington's emissary, entered.

He didn't look like a diplomat, but rather like a bailiff come to seize the furniture. He placed a blue folder on the table. The sharp sound of paper against wood was the only sound in the room.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Wayne in a low voice, without preamble. "The President has decided. The Eagle returns to the nest."

There was no cry. Just a cold, calculating silence.

“Here is the note from Washington,” the American continued. “You have two options. Option A: You accept the Russian terms. Neutrality of Ukraine, demilitarization of the East. It’s a political humiliation, I grant you. But it’s peace.”

He paused, scrutinizing the impassive faces.

— Option B: You refuse. You choose confrontation. But hear me clearly: if you fire, you will

be alone. The US Navy has been ordered to turn back to Guam. NATO has been a non-entity since midnight.

Wayne waited for the reaction. He expected fear, pleas.

Instead, Chancellor Von Hollen put down her tablet. She adjusted her glasses with icy calm. She looked at Wayne the way one looks at an incompetent employee about to be fired.

"Is that all, Mr. Wayne?" she asked.

The American blinked in surprise.

— This is a complete abandonment, Madam Chancellor. You don't seem to grasp the gravity of the situation...

“I understand perfectly,” she interrupted sharply and professorially. “You’re trying to blackmail us with a threat of withdrawal to force us to accept a Russian diktat. It’s a very primitive negotiating tactic.”

She stood up and walked towards the window, turning her back on the emissary.

— Let's talk facts, Mr. Wayne. Let's talk numbers. Russia has a GDP equivalent to that of Spain. It's an economic dwarf. A gas station with nuclear weapons they'd never dare use.

She turned around, a condescending smile on her lips.

— You're talking about war? With what? Our intelligence services are unequivocal. Their tanks are refurbished Soviet relics. Their microchips are third-rate Chinese contraband. We, the European Union, represent the world's leading trading power. We have technological, industrial, and budgetary superiority.

The Pole, Kowalski, intervened, his voice oozing martial arrogance.

Our simulations are clear. If Moscow so much as twitches, our drones and air force will send them back to the Stone Age in 72 hours. They're bluffing. Putin is playing poker with a pair of twos. And you Americans are just folding. It's pathetic.

Wayne shook his head in disbelief.

— This isn't poker, it's war. You're underestimating their resilience. You're underestimating their hidden stockpiles. The Bear isn't dead, it's hibernating.

“The Bear is a bum!” Von Hollen declared, rapping his finger on the American dossier. “If we give in to their blackmail, the Euro will collapse. The credibility of our Single Market will be shattered. We cannot afford to back down economically. Therefore, we will not back down.”

She threw the blue folder on the floor, like trash.

— Tell your President that Europe doesn't need America to manage a declining regional power. We reject the ultimatum. We will mobilize our forces and impose peace through technological superiority. It's a matter of logic.

She then turned to Admiral de Castries, who remained silent in the shadows.

— France agrees, Henri? Surely the foremost army in Europe isn't going to be intimidated by falsified Russian statistics?

All eyes turned towards the Frenchman. This was the moment of truth.

De Castries felt his wrist twitch again. A second message:*LET THEM LOCK THEM IN. BE SILENT.*

He looked at Von Hollen. He saw in her not courage, but a*hubris*Terrifying. The arrogance of technocrats who believe that war obeys the laws of the market. They were going to send young men to their deaths because they had calculated that Russia's GDP was too low to win. They were confusing money with steel.

He could warn them. He could tell them about the missiles*Zircon*They didn't care about GDP.

But he remembered the order.*Sign nothing. Observe.*

Admiral de Castries folded his hands on the table. He presented the Chancellor with a smooth, unreadable face, a marble mask.

"France takes note of your analysis, Madam Chancellor," he said simply, in a neutral voice.

Von Hollen took this clinical observation as an endorsement.

— Good. Europe is united.

Thomas Wayne picked up his file from the floor. He looked at the Europeans with a mixture of pity and dread. He understood that there was no point in arguing with people who lived in an alternate reality made up of growth curves.

"You will not march towards victory," the American said softly. "You are marching towards the slaughterhouse."

He went out. The heavy door closed on the "Council of the Blind".

Outside, the rain intensified, pounding against the fragile glass of the Berlaymont building. Inside, the Chancellor ordered coffee and reopened her Excel spreadsheets, convinced she had already won the war. De Castries, for his part, sent a single cryptic message to Paris: *SUICIDAL*.

CHAPTER 3: THE BEAR AWAKENS

January 18, 2032

Smolensk Oblast, "Zapad" Command Bunker.

The hour of Judgment.

The earth was not yet trembling, but the electromagnetic spectrum was already screaming silently. In the endless plains of the East, where the horizon merges with the white void of winter, two worldviews were about to collide.

Buried sixty meters beneath the permafrost, in a cathedral of concrete and cables, Marshal Nikolai Volkov waited. He was not a man of speeches. He was a man of logistics and steel, a veteran who knew that war is not won with PowerPoints, but with shells.

In front of him, on the huge holographic screen, the "Grand European Army" advanced.

It was an impressive sight. Columns of Leopard 3 and Leclerc XLR tanks, networked together, crossed the Polish border. In the sky, squadrons of Eurofighters and F-35s, bristling with sensors, scanned the horizon. They were convinced they saw everything. They thought their "Combat Cloud Bubble" gave them omniscience.

"They are entering the engagement zone, Marshal," announced an operator. "Their fire control radars are active. They are searching for targets."

Volkov gave a sad smile. The Europeans were looking for tanks and planes. They were looking for a symmetrical, "fair" war.

"They'll only find ghosts," Volkov murmured. "Turn off the lights. Activate the 'Whisper' protocol."

Phase 1: Blindness

At precisely 10:00 AM, the NATO control screens in Ramstein and Warsaw flashed. Then they went dark.

It wasn't an explosion, but a suffocation. Thousands of terabytes of junk data flooded European logistics servers. At the same time, Western communication satellites were "dazzled" by terrestrial lasers or jammed by massive interference.

In the cockpits of the F-35s, the pilots saw their data links turn red. No more positions of the allies. No more radar images from the AWACS. The most sophisticated aircraft in the world suddenly became blind and deaf, isolated in a gray sky.

Phase 2 : La Saturation

"They are confused," noted the Russian operator. "Their formations are breaking up."

"Send in the swarm," Volkov ordered.

From the Belarusian forests and the Russian steppes, it wasn't hypersonic missiles that first appeared. It was drones. Thousands of them.*Grant-5*Propeller-driven, slow, noisy, made of plastic for a few hundred euros. And with them, old Soviet missiles brought out of mothballs, without explosive charges, just there to make up the numbers.

On the degraded European radars, it was chaos. Thousands of targets were hurtling towards them.

The Patriot and Mamba anti-aircraft batteries, flagships of Western technology, reacted as they had been programmed: they engaged the threat.

The sky lit up with trails of smoke. European interceptor missiles — technological marvels costing two million euros each — sped off to shoot down five-hundred-euro polystyrene drones.

It was an economic equation, and Europe was losing it at the speed of sound.

Phase 3: Exhaustion

Six hours. It only took six hours.

In the Polish army's forward headquarters, a general turned pale as he looked at his logistics officer.

— What do you mean "Winchester"?

— We're out of ammunition, General. The Patriot batteries on the Vistula have fired all their ammunition on the first wave. The reserve stocks are... empty.

— Empty? But we have deliveries scheduled!

"It's a just-in-time operation, General. The factories in Germany can only produce four missiles a month. We just fired three hundred in one morning. There's nothing left in the hangars."

This was Europe's deadly secret. For ten years, it had optimized its stocks for peace, managing the war like a supermarket manages its yogurts: zero stock, all flow.

On the other side, Volkov had spent five years building an underground "war economy". His factories ran on 3x8 shifts, accumulating mountains of munitions in secret bunkers in the Urals.

Europe had an army for a sprint. Russia had an army for a marathon. And the sprint had just ended.

Phase 4: The Hammer

In the Zapad bunker, Volkov saw the enemy defense indicators turn green. The European batteries were silent, their empty launchers pointing skyward like dead arms.

"They're naked," said Volkov. "Let's get this over with."

He pressed a key.

This time, physics reasserted itself, brutal and merciless.*Iskander-M*and the*Kinzhal*They took off. They weren't flying by magic. They were just flying too fast and too high for their exhausted defenses.

They struck with surgical precision. Not the tanks on the front line, but the logistics.

German army fuel depots: vaporized.

The bridges over the Oder: destroyed.

The command centers: buried.

The air bases: cratered.

For 48 hours, it was a methodical bombardment. The European tanks, the best in the world, became useless. Without fuel, without orders, without air cover, they were nothing but motionless steel targets in the mud.

The courageous European pilots were still taking off, but without AWACS to guide them, they were being shot down by the Russian S-500 batteries, which saw everything.

On the morning of the third day, January 21, silence returned to the Polish plain. It was not the silence of peace, but that of defeat.

Europe thought it was playing a game of technological chess. Russia played rugby with an iron bar.

In his bunker, Volkov poured himself a hot cup of tea. There was no triumph in his eyes, just the weariness of someone who had known from the beginning.

"They've forgotten the only rule that matters," he said to his aide-de-camp. "Quantity has a quality of its own."

The Bear was awake. And he had just broken the backbone of the West.

CHAPTER 4: THE FINGER ON THE BUTTON

January 21, 2032
Élysée Palace, Paris.
PC Jupiter (Bunker Basement).
23h50.
The air in the presidential bunker, buried under fifty meters of reinforced concrete, was thick with the hum of servers and the acrid smell of suppressed fear. The crisis room was full. Staff officers, diplomatic advisors, liaison officers: all had gray faces, dark circles under their eyes, glued to the main wall screen.

The map of Europe was bleeding. The Polish front line had vanished. Russian armored divisions had broken through. Warsaw was no longer responding. The Guards' advance guards were already crossing the Oder. Berlin was within artillery range.

President Adrien Montaigne was seated in the center of the U-shaped table. He was not looking at the screen. He was looking at General Pierre Valéry, his Chief of the Defence Staff (CEMA).

The General stood rigid, immaculate in his uniform. He held a black briefcase attached to his wrist by a steel handcuff. The "Briefcase".

"Mr. President," said Valéry, his voice steady. "The time for decision has passed. We are up against the wall."

He placed his free hand on the briefcase.

Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union is unequivocal. In the event of armed aggression, we must provide aid and assistance by all means. Our allies are falling. France's honor is at stake. We must strike.

Montaigne ran a hand over his face.

— To strike... You're talking about the apocalypse, Pierre. If I give the order,*The Terrible*Releases sixteen M51 missiles. Moscow disappears. And twenty minutes later, Paris is a radioactive crater.

“It’s deterrence, sir,” insisted the General, his eyes shining with martial fervor. “If we don’t fire now, our word is worthless. France will be dishonored for a thousand years. She will be the one who let her brothers die.”

Montaigne stood up slowly. The silence in the room was absolute.

— Honor... murmured the President.

He fixed his gaze on the General.

— I will not sacrifice sixty-seven million French people to save your honor, General. I will not be the president who has turned this country into a graveyard to respect a piece of paper signed thirty years ago.

A shrill ring shattered the atmosphere. The secure phone line to Europe.

Montaigne sat down and picked up the phone. He put it on speakerphone. Erika Von Hollen's voice filled the room. She wasn't crying. She wasn't screaming. Her voice was metallic, cold, terrifying in its desperate lucidity.

— Adrien, said the Chancellor. My generals tell me that you have not yet opened your silos.

— No, Erika.

— You know the Treaty, Adrien. Article 4. Article 42.7. It is the law. It is the foundation of our civilization. If you do not fire now, you will not only kill the Alliance. You will destroy the very idea of Europe. You will destroy the Law.

— If I shoot, Erika, I destroy life.

“Life without the law is nothing!” the German woman declared. “Europe is a legal construct. If France, the nuclear guarantor, shirks its responsibilities, then the Union never existed. Are you going to let us die to save your own skin? Is that what you call the greatness of France?”

— I'm sorry, Erika.

Don't be sorry. Be an ally! Shoot! It's a legal obligation!

Montaigne cut the line. Silence returned, heavier than before. He had just killed political Europe. He knew it. Valéry looked at him with undisguised contempt.

— Go out, said Montaigne.

- Sir ?

— Everyone out. Leave me alone with the Red Line.

The officers evacuated, hesitantly. Valéry left last, clutching the nuclear briefcase to him like a sacred relic that had just been desecrated.

Montaigne remained alone facing the old black telephone connected to the Kremlin. There were no more treaties, no more Europe, no more friends. There was only nuclear physics and game theory.

He picked up the phone.

No interpreter. Calm breathing at the other end.

— Good evening, Adrien.

Vladimir Putin's voice was calm and pragmatic. No triumph, just an observation.

— Vladimir.

“My infrared satellites are detecting thermal activity around your silos in Brittany,” said the Russian. “And my sonars are tracking*The Terrible*in the North Atlantic.

"They are ready," confirmed Montaigne.

— I know. Listen to me carefully, Adrien. This isn't a movie. I'm not threatening you for fun. It's an equation. If even one trapdoor opens in your house, my system*Perimeter*It automatically launches everything I have. Six thousand heads. There will be no more France, no more Russia. Just ashes.

Putin paused.

— But I have no interest in destroying France. You didn't attack me. Your planes stayed on the ground.

— What do you suggest?

— Immobility. You keep your silos closed. I keep mine closed. My tanks will stop on the Oder. I will not cross the Rhine. I will not lay a finger on a French citizen.

— And Germany? Poland?

— This is a continental matter that no longer concerns you, Adrien. You have a choice. You can die for them tonight. Or you can live to rebuild tomorrow.

Montaigne closed his eyes. He saw again the face of General Valéry speaking of honor. He saw again the faces of his own children.

It was the prisoner's dilemma. If one betrays, he gets away. If both cooperate in destruction, everyone dies.

"I will not shoot," said Montaigne. "On one condition."

— I'm listening.

— Total protection of French territory. And recognition of our sphere of influence in the Mediterranean. If you violate this agreement, I'll take everything, even if it's too late.

— Agreed. That makes sense.

— I will be cursed by history, Vladimir.

— History is written by those who survive, Adrien. The dead write nothing.

The line cut out.

Montaigne hung up the receiver. His hands weren't trembling, but he felt chilled inside. He had just saved sixty-seven million lives. And to do so, he had had to stab Europe right in the heart.

The door opened. Valéry entered, still hoping for an order to fire.

— Mr. President?

Montaigne stood up. He seemed to have aged ten years in ten minutes.

— Order the Strategic Oceanic Force to return to standby, General. We are not firing.

— But... Germany...

— Germany is alone, Pierre. Prepare my plane. We are leaving for Switzerland to negotiate the armistice.

General Valéry saluted, stiff, his face closed. He obeyed, but in his eyes, Montaigne read the word he would bear like a cross until the end of his days:*Traitor*.

"Let's go," said Montaigne. "We still have one country to save."

CHAPTER 5: THE NECESSARY BETRAYAL

January 23, 2032
Swiss Alps, Canton of Valais.
On board the "Leviathan", an armored diplomatic train.
4:00 AM.
The storm that ravaged Europe stopped here, broken by the eternal peaks of the Alps. In this icy sanctuary, the war was but a distant echo.

A black iron serpent glided silently through the night. Inside the central carriage, decorated with dark wood paneling, time seemed to have stood still. There was only the steady clatter of wheels on the rails, marking the rhythm of a fateful countdown.

Adrien Montaigne was sitting opposite Vladimir Putin. The French President was no longer wearing a tie. His collar was open, his skin gray, his eyes ringed with red. He looked like a man who had just walked through hell without getting burned, but who had left his soul in the flames.

Before them lay a single, thick document, bound in black leather: the "Treaty of the Alps".

"Is everything there?" asked the Russian. His voice was calm, that of a man who had won the chess game before even moving his king.

Montaigne placed his hand on the back of the chair. He felt the grain of the leather beneath his damp fingers. He had a sudden, violent urge to vomit. What he was about to do was not diplomacy. It was an autopsy on a still-warm body.

"Let's reread the additional clauses," said Montaigne in a hoarse voice. "I want there to be no ambiguity."

He opened the file to page 14, appendix "Energy and Reconstruction".

— **Secret clause number 1**, lut Montaigne. *The Russian Federation guarantees the French Republic exclusive and priority access to enriched uranium, natural gas, and rare earth elements for a non-negotiable period of fifty years. These deliveries will be made at a fixed price, 40% lower than the 2030 world price.*

The Russian nodded, a barely perceptible smile on his lips.
"That's the price of your neutrality. You'll have the cheapest energy in the world, Adrien. Your industry will crush those of China and the United States. You'll build an empire on my resources."
Montaigne ignored the remark and continued, his throat tight.

— **Secret clause number 2**. *In exchange for recognition of Russian military administration zones in Poland and East Germany, Russia grants French consortiums a monopoly on contracts for the reconstruction of civil, digital and railway infrastructure in said zones.*

Putin gave a short, dry laugh.
— That's brilliant, Adrien. Really. You're not just letting them down. You want to be paid to rebuild their houses after I destroyed them. You're turning their defeat into your GDP. That's... Napoleonic.
Montaigne closed his eyes for a moment. The image of Berlin in flames flashed through his mind. He saw himself again, a young Erasmus student in Munich, laughing with German friends. He was selling their ashes to secure France's future.

*I am a monster,*think-t-il.*But a monster that will keep the people warm this winter.*

— It's a take-it-or-leave-it situation, Vladimir. France needs markets. Europe is dead, I have to feed the survivors at home.

"I'm not judging," said the Russian, holding out his gold fountain pen. "I'm respecting. It's realism. Sign."

Montaigne picked up the pen. The metal was hot. He hesitated for a second. A second of eternity in which he heard the ghostly cries of his betrayed allies. Then, he affixed his signature to the bottom of the parchment. The scratching of the pen echoed like the sound of a guillotine.

Vladimir signed in turn, quickly, with a broad stroke.

— It's done. The fire will stop at 06:00.

The Russian stood up and held out his hand.
— To our partnership, Adrien.
Montaigne rose slowly. He looked at the outstretched hand. He knew that by shaking it, he would seal the continent's fate. He extended his own. The contact was firm, cold. Montaigne felt bile rise to his lips. He wanted to run to the toilet, wash his hands with bleach, scrub until they bled.

Instead, he held the Russian's gaze.
— Don't disappoint me, Vladimir. If you lay a finger on a Frenchman, this paper will be worthless against my missiles.
— I know. Goodbye, my friend.

The Russian left the carriage, leaving Montaigne alone with his glass of water and his shame. The French President slumped into his chair, his head in his hands, as the train sped off into the night, carrying with it the secret of the founding of the new Empire.

06h00.
Europe Bridge, Strasbourg.
Franco-German border.
Day was barely breaking, grey and dirty, over the Rhine. The river carried black debris, remnants of the bombings upstream.

Sergeant Major Maury, of the 152nd Infantry Regiment, adjusted his assault rifle against his shoulder. He was cold. But it wasn't the wind that made him shiver.

In front of him, on the Kehl bridge, a human tide was advancing.

They were thousands. Entire families, old people pushing shopping carts full of clothes, children crying in oversized blankets. Germans. They were fleeing the columns of Russian tanks approaching Stuttgart and Munich. They were fleeing towards France, towards the light, towards the only country that wasn't at war.

They advanced with their arms raised, pleading, their eyes filled with hope as they saw the tricolour flag waving on the other side of the bridge.

Maury's radio crackled.

— *This is PC Jupiter. To all border units. Flash Priority Order.*

Maury put his hand to his earpiece. He looked at a blonde woman, fifty meters away, who was dragging a broken suitcase. She was smiling at him, thinking she was saved.

— *Order of the President of the Republic*, the radio is cracking.*Immediate implementation of the Treaty of the Alps. Hermetic closure of the borders. I repeat: Hermetic closure. No refugees are to pass. None.*

Maury froze.
"Lieutenant?" he called, his throat dry. "They're here. They're civilians."
The Lieutenant, a young officer with a stern face, approached. He had heard the order. He looked at the crowd, then at his men.

— You heard, Sergeant. Close the gate.

— But... we can't leave them here! The Russians are coming!

"That's the order, Maury!" barked the officer, a glint of despair in his eyes. "We're closing! Now!"

Sergeant Major Maury advanced slowly towards the heavy gate mechanism. The German woman saw him. Her smile vanished. She began to run, shouting something in German, holding out her hands.

Maury pulled the lever.

With a metallic screech that tore through the morning silence, the heavy steel doors began to slam shut. The woman crashed against the bars, screaming, clutching the cold metal. Behind her, the clamor of thousands of voices rose, a cry of pure terror.

Maury took a step back, lowering his eyes to avoid her gaze. On the other side of the

Rhine, on the horizon, a column of black smoke rose into the sky. The Russians were coming. And France had just double-locked its door.

Betrayal was no longer just a word on paper. It was the sound of a gate slamming shut in the faces of those we had sworn to protect.

CHAPTER 6: THE EUROPEAN WINTER

December 20, 2032

Berlin, Alexanderplatz.

Russian Military Occupation Zone.

Temperature: -12°C.

Winter hadn't fallen on Berlin; it had crushed it.

The German capital, once the beating heart of the European economy, resembled a grayish specter frozen in ice. There had been no public electricity for three weeks. The famous neon signs were dead. The trams were at a standstill, their cables torn or frozen. Only Russian armored patrols remained.*BTR-90*, which were rolling slowly through the dirty snow, broke the sepulchral silence of the city.

Karl Weber, a former senior engineer at Siemens, tightened his threadbare wool scarf around his face. He was hungry. A dull, gnawing hunger that had been twisting his stomach for days. He pulled behind him a child's sled piled high with wooden planks salvaged from a bombed-out library.

There was no more Russian gas for Germany. The tap had been turned off on the day of the armistice. And the coal-fired power plants, lacking spare parts and personnel, had shut down one by one.

Karl looked up at the Fernsehturm, the television tower. It no longer shone. It was a black needle planted in a leaden sky.

All around him, Berliners wandered like shadows. They were queuing in front of the International Red Cross aid trucks, hoping for a bowl of soup or a blanket. But the supplies were empty. America wasn't sending anything. America had turned its back.

Suddenly, a deep rumble shook the ground.

Karl froze, fear gripping his stomach. The fighting was over, but the sound of engines remained a harbinger of death.

A column of trucks appeared at the end of Karl-Marx-Allee. They weren't olive-green Russian military trucks. They were white, immaculate, modern, a stark contrast to the surrounding grime. On their sides were familiar logos, but terrible to German eyes:*VINCI ENERGIES*, *BOUYGUES CONSTRUCTION*, *ENGIE*.

They were escorted by light vehicles of the French Gendarmerie and the*Tiger*Russians.

The convoy stopped in the middle of the square. Well-fed men in fluorescent orange

parkas, equipped with helmets featuring connected visors, got out. They weren't looking at the ruins. They weren't looking at the hungry specters surrounding them. They were looking at their tablets.

Karl approached, fascinated and horrified.

A French foreman unfurled a holographic table in the middle of the snow. He pointed to a destroyed electrical transformer.

"Well, the Mitte sector should be connected to the Strasbourg-Rhône network tonight," he said, sounding bored. The Russian Embassy is cold.

"It's a complete mess in here," sighed a technician, lighting an e-cigarette. "I can't wait for next week. I'm going back to Nice. Apparently it's 15 degrees."

— You don't say. I'm fed up with freezing my ass off wiring these ruins. Come on, let's get to work and finish quickly.

Karl felt his anger rising. They weren't laughing. They weren't even mocking. They didn't care. For them, Berlin wasn't a human tragedy, it was just a dirty, poorly heated construction site. They were completely oblivious to the misery surrounding them, like one would ignore ants on a sidewalk.

— *traitor*(Traitors), spat an old woman next to Karl.

The French foreman didn't even turn around. He continued calibrating his device.

— Ivan, can you move the civilians away? They are obstructing the security perimeter.

A Russian soldier approached, his hand on his baton, his face hard. This was the division of labor: France handled the business and comfort, Russia handled the violence and the filth.

Karl watched the French unroll their cables. France was connecting Germany as if it were a garden outbuilding, without a thought for those who lived there.

That was it, the new European order. The total indifference of the victors.

February 15, 2033

Rome, Via dei Condotti.

The Latin Braderie.

A thousand kilometers to the south, the cold was less biting, but the silence was terrifying. Rome, the eternal city, the city of noise, honking horns, and raised voices, was mute. No scooters. No tourists. Just the wind stirring greasy papers in the deserted streets.

Italy hadn't been bombed, it had been strangled. The banking system had collapsed. The

lira was worthless.

Hélène Darcier, director of acquisitions for the group*LVMH-Kering Fusion*She was walking down Rome's most luxurious street. The click of her heels on the cobblestones echoed like gunshots in the city's deathly silence.

She entered the historic Fendi headquarters. The Italian CEO was waiting for her, seated in a cold office lit by a kerosene lamp. He looked like a fallen aristocrat awaiting the guillotine.

"Madame Darcier," he said, bowing slightly. "Welcome to Rome."

- Sir.

Hélène didn't smile. She offered no politeness. She sat down and placed a contract on the table. Her movements were precise, surgical.

— The consortium is ready. We're taking everything. The brand, the workshops, the patents, the real estate assets.

The Italian's eyes widened.

— It's our national heritage! You're taking advantage of our bankruptcy to plunder Italian genius!

“We’re ‘saving’ it,” Hélène corrected coldly, without the slightest emotion. “Look at the figures. We pay in New Francs, indexed to Gold and Energy. It’s the only currency that’s legal tender. If you refuse, you’ll close tomorrow, and your artisans will starve.”

The Italian looked at the amount. It was a paltry sum compared to its value in 2030. But it was a fortune in the world of 2033. It was the difference between life and death.

"What will become of us?" he asked in a broken voice.

— A subsidiary. The "Italian Style", French property.

He signed. He had no choice.

As she left, Hélène put her sunglasses back on. She encountered hateful stares in the street, graffiti*France Barks*on the walls. She felt nothing. Neither pity nor triumph. It was just business. Europe was a supermarket in liquidation, and France was the only solvent customer.

His phone vibrated. A high-priority encrypted notification.

SUMMONS: GRAND PALAIS, PARIS.

SUBJECT: LAUNCH PHASE 2 - "PHOENIX".

STATUS: MANDATORY.

Hélène gave a barely perceptible, sly smile. The Italian takeover was just the appetizer. The real feast was about to begin. She dialed a number.

— Prepare the plane. We're going back to Paris. The Architect is waiting for us.

CHAPTER 7: THE PHOENIX PLAN

15 Mars 2033

Paris, Grand Palais Éphémère.

The Consecration.

Paris had never been so beautiful, nor so cruel.

While the rest of the continent still waded through cold mud and rubble, the City of Lights shone with an insolent brilliance. The Champs-Élysées was bedecked with tricolor flags intertwined with the Russian double-headed eagle. The terraces were packed, champagne flowed freely, and electricity—a commodity more precious than gold everywhere else—was squandered on grandiose illuminations that defied the night.

Under the glass roof of the Grand Palais, before an audience of three thousand dignitaries, industrialists and generals, History was about to change hands. The air smelled of expensive perfume and triumph.

Adrien Montaigne took to the podium. He had traded his wartime dark circles for the tanned and rested complexion of a victor. Behind him, a giant screen displayed a single logo: a golden phoenix rising from gray ashes, above the words*PHOENIX INITIATIVE*.

— Ladies and Gentlemen, Europeans, began Montaigne.

His voice, amplified by perfect sound reinforcement, resonated under the dome like that of a Roman emperor addressing the Senate.

— Winter was long. It was harsh. Our German, Italian, and Polish brothers suffered. Europe paid a heavy price for its past mistakes. But France, true to its universal calling, will not let the cradle of civilization die in silence.

He paused dramatically, scanning the room.

— Today, together with our partners from the Russian Federation, we are launching the largest construction project in human history. We will rebuild every bridge, every power plant, every school. We will bring light back into your homes.

Polite but enthusiastic applause crackled through the crowd. In the front row, the captains of French industry—the CEOs of Vinci, Bouygues, Thales, and TotalEnergies—were applauding wildly. They didn't see a humanitarian effort. They saw order books full for the next fifty years. They saw an absolute monopoly.

Montaigne resumed, his tone more serious, more incisive.

— But this reconstruction comes at a cost. Europe is ruined. Its currencies are dead. Its

states are technically bankrupt. Who will pay?

A heavy silence fell. It was time for the final blow.

"France and Russia will pay," announced Montaigne. "We will advance the capital. We will provide the energy. We will bring the technology."

He turned towards the right side of the stage, where the delegations of the defeated countries stood huddled in the shadows.

— In exchange, and to guarantee the sustainability of these vital investments, a new structure is being created today: the**Continental Infrastructure Bank**.

The giant screen displayed the details of the "deal". It was written in small legal print, but the meaning was clear to everyone in the room:

1. **Transfer of Ownership:**The electricity, rail, port and digital networks of Germany, Poland and Italy are being transferred to the Bank (60% owned by France, 40% by Russia) for a period of 99 years.
2. **Toll rights:**Every kilowatt-hour consumed in Berlin, every train running in Warsaw, every container unloaded in Rotterdam will pay a direct tax to Paris and Moscow.
3. **Single Currency:**The "New Franc" (indexed to Gold and Energy) becomes the sole legal tender for major industrial transactions.

It was a total economic annexation. A vassalage disguised as a Marshall Plan.

Montaigne invited the German Chancellor to join him.

Erika Von Hollen stood up. She had aged twenty years in a single year. She no longer wore her colorful suits of yesteryear, but a drab, gray, almost monastic ensemble. She walked towards the lectern like a condemned woman towards the scaffold, under the condescending gazes of the Parisian elite.

She was no longer the arrogant woman who threw files on the floor in Brussels. She was the leader of a hungry people.

She picked up the pen. She looked at Montaigne. There was no hatred in his eyes, just infinite resignation.

"You've won, Adrien," she murmured off-mic, so that only he could hear. "You've made Germany your colony."

“I made Germany my partner,” Montaigne corrected, a dazzling smile that didn’t reach his cold eyes. “Sign, Erika. Your power plants are waiting for our uranium. Your people are waiting for our wheat. Don’t keep them waiting.”

She signed.

The moment the pen touched the paper, a clamor arose in the room. But it wasn't for her. The doors at the back opened.

Vladimir Putin entered the stage.

He advanced with a supple, self-possessed step, to the cheers of the crowd. He hadn't come in uniform, but in an impeccable Italian civilian suit. He crossed the stage, superbly ignoring the German Chancellor who stepped aside, head bowed.

Adrien Montaigne and Vladimir Putin met in the center, beneath the Phoenix logo. They shook hands. Flashes popped like a storm of white light.

It was the image of the century. The Eagle and the Rooster, united, sharing the spoils of the Old Continent to the applause of those who would enrich themselves on the ruins.

In the shadows of a VIP box, Hélène Darcier watched the scene while sipping a glass of Roederer Cristal. Her phone vibrated.

NOTIFICATION MISTRAL AI :

Contracts validated.

Start of operations: Immediate.

Deployment order sent to civil engineering divisions.

She smiled, emptying her glass. Outside, on the banks of the Seine, engines roared. Cement mixer trucks and giant cranes, parked and waiting, switched on their orange flashing lights in the Parisian night.

It wasn't an army of tanks setting out to conquer Europe this time. It was an army of cement mixers and fiber optic cables.

The occupation had begun. And it was built to last a hundred years.

CHAPTER 8: THE SUN OF CADARACHE

August 15, 2033

Saint-Paul-lez-Durance, Provence.

Site of the DEMO Reactor (successor to ITER).

2:00 PM. Outside temperature: 42°C.

The Provençal sun beat down on the garrigue hills with biblical ferocity. The cicadas, overwhelmed by the heat, had fallen silent. The cracked earth seemed to beg for mercy. But in the heart of the Durance valley, another heat, infinitely more terrifying, was about to be born.

The Cadarache site no longer resembled the university research center it had once been. It had become a fortress. A triple perimeter of electrified fences, topped with autonomous watchtowers equipped with laser machine guns, isolated the complex from the rest of the world. Joint patrols—Legionnaires from the 2nd Foreign Engineer Regiment and Spetsnaz from the Imperial Guard—watched every bush, every shadow.

At the center of this system, the Tokamak building stood like a pagan temple. An eighty-meter-high white concrete cube, without windows, designed to contain the wrath of a star.

In the control room, the atmosphere was icy, air-conditioned to a precise 19 degrees. The silence was reverent, broken only by the hum of the quantum supercomputer fans.

The Scientific Director, Claire Delacroix, adjusted her glasses. She was forty years old, with purple circles under her eyes and the responsibility for the future of humanity on her shoulders.

To his right, Professor Yuri Sidorov, a legend of Russian nuclear physics, was nervously tapping on his console.

"Tritium injection ready," Sidorov announced in his gravelly voice. "The superconducting magnets are at critical temperature: 4 Kelvin. The magnetic field is stable."

Claire looked towards the bulletproof glass window overlooking the reactor pit. Nothing could be seen, of course. Everything was happening inside the vacuum chamber, behind meters of steel and lead.

"Mr. President," she said into her microphone. "We are in the final sequence. Ignition in two minutes."

In the VIP gallery, protected by thirty-centimeter-thick radiation-shielded glass, Adrien Montaigne stood. There was no champagne this time. No smiles. Just raw tension. Beside

him, the Russian Prime Minister watched the screens with predatory intensity.

If it exploded, Provence would be wiped off the map.

If it worked, they would become gods.

"Proceed, Claire," ordered Montaigne. "Give us the fire."

Ignition Sequence

— T minus 60 seconds.

The walls of the control room vibrated imperceptibly. It wasn't an earthquake; it was the sound of giant magnets awakening, warping local spacetime to create an invisible magnetic bottle.

— Plasma initiated. Temperature: 10 million degrees.

On the central screen, a false-color image, reconstructed by magnetic sensors, showed the plasma torus lighting up. At this temperature, the material emitted primarily in the X-ray range, invisible to the naked eye.

— Hybrid wave injection. Active neutral heating.

The temperature curve climbed vertically.

50 millions.

100 millions.

*— We are approaching the Lawson threshold,*Sidorov murmured, his eyes fixed on the telemetry data.*Come on, my dear... hang in there...*

150 million degrees. Ten times the temperature of the Sun's core.

Suddenly, a shrill alarm sounded. A red light flashed on Claire's desk.

"Plasma instability in sector 4!" yelled a technician. "The magnetic field is flickering! We're going to hit the wall!"

"Quantum correction!" Claire barked. "Let the Mistral AI handle the lockdown! Don't touch anything!"

It was a crazy gamble. No human could react quickly enough to stabilize a molten plasma. They had entrusted the keys to the reactor to Franco-Russian Artificial Intelligence.

For three interminable seconds, the fate of the world hung on lines of code.

The ring of fire flickered, threatening to shatter and vaporize the enclosure. Then, with

supernatural gentleness, it stabilized. The AI had recalculated the geometry of the magnetic field in a matter of nanoseconds.

— *Plasma stable,*announced the synthetic voice of Mistral.*Self-sustaining fusion reaction. Q factor greater than 10.*

An incredulous silence fell over the room. Then, Sidorov slammed his fist on the table, a resounding victory.

— *Q equals 15... Q equals 20...*continues the AI.

The energy production curve exceeded the scale of the graph. The reactor no longer consumed energy to operate. It produced it. It produced titanic, infinite, clean quantities.

— Net output: 2 Gigawatts and increasing, Claire Delacroix breathed.

She turned towards the VIP gallery. She was crying.

Adrien Montaigne watched the numbers scroll by. He didn't see megawatts. He saw the end of the story.

He foresaw the end of Arab oil.

The end of American shale gas.

The end of German wind turbines.

He envisioned a world where the Alliance could desalinate the oceans to irrigate the Sahara, fly trains at 2000 km/h, and heat the whole of Europe for the price of a coffee.

"It's done," he told the Russian. "We have stolen fire from the gods."

The Russian Prime Minister nodded, his eyes shining.

— The Americans have the Dollar. We have the Sun. Their paper is worthless compared to our light.

6:00 p.m.

As they left the complex, the heat of the Provençal summer seemed almost mild compared to the furnace they had just conquered.

Montaigne stopped in the churchyard. He looked at the high-voltage power lines that ran from Cadarache northward, toward Italy, toward Germany. These cables were not just copper wires. They were the chains that would link the continent to France for eternity.

He took out his secure phone and composed a message for General Valéry in Paris.

"TOTAL SUCCESS."

TRIGGER PHASE 3.

DENOUNCE THE OIL CONTRACTS.

WE ARE FREE.

In the distance, the cicadas' song had resumed, indifferent to the fact that humankind had just entered a new era. In the belly of the concrete beast, a small violet sun purred softly, guarded by algorithms and legionnaires, ready to illuminate the new French Empire.

CHAPTER 9: SHADOWS OF PEACE

November 12, 2033

Warsaw, Praga district.

Northern Rail Transit Zone.

2:00 AM.

The war had officially ended almost two years ago, but in the dark alleys of Warsaw, it had never ceased. It had simply changed its face. It no longer wore uniforms. It wore balaclavas, silencers, and C-4 suitcases.

Commander Damien Bourel of the General Directorate for Internal Security (DGSI) adjusted his tactical earpiece. He was crouching on the roof of an abandoned textile factory, his gaze fixed on the old railway warehouses below. The icy November rain was turning the city's soot into a sticky black mud.

Beside him, motionless like a gargoyle, Captain Viktor Sokolov of the FSB (Russian Federal Security Service) was checking the bolt of his Vintorez, a silent sniper rifle capable of penetrating a bulletproof vest at 400 meters.

— *Target confirmed*, whispered Sokolov in Russian, his voice instantly translated by the AI in Damien's earpiece.*Six individuals. They are unloading the truck. These are heavy crates. Probably Javelin or plastic explosives.*

Damien activated his thermal vision. The silhouettes glowed red in the cold night.

— We're waiting for confirmation of the delivery, Viktor. Paris wants proof of the equipment's origin. If it's British equipment, we have the green light to clean it up.

"It's always British equipment," grumbled the Russian. "The British don't have an army anymore, so they send toys to the local fanatics to derail our trains. They can't stand the Transcontinental going through here."

The construction of the high-speed rail line, the vital artery that was to link Paris to Moscow and then to China, passed through Warsaw. It was the primary target of the "Free Resistance," a nebulous group of Polish nationalists and mercenaries, covertly financed by MI6 and the CIA to slow Eurasian integration.

— *Contact*Damien announced.*A man leaves the office. It's "The Pianist." Our intermediary.*

The man in question, a former Polish intelligence officer who had gone underground, was exchanging a briefcase with the truck driver.

Damien zoomed in with his connected camera. The Mistral AI analyzed the image in real

time.

"Identification: Harris Falcon IV type satellite communication case. Origin: US Army / NATO stocks. Probability of CIA involvement: 98%."

"We've got it," said Damien. "It's signed Washington."

Sokolov gave a cold smile.

— Shall we go? I'm cold, and they'll be finished soon.

— Let's go. No prisoners, except for The Pianist. We need to find out where the rest of the cargo is.

The assault was a terrifying demonstration of the new Franco-Russian doctrine. No warning. No negotiation. Just eradication.

Damien gave the signal. Two drones.*Black Hornet*French troops swooped down from the sky, dropping blinding flashbang grenades into the middle of the group. At the same moment, Sokolov's Spetsnaz, hidden in the sewers and surrounding ruins, opened fire.

The muffled gunfire from the Russian weapons made a noise like a sewing machine:*Phew-phew-phew*.

The six men in the truck fell before they could even touch their weapons. It was surgical. Brutal.

Damien jumped from the roof, using his lightweight exoskeleton to cushion the six-meter fall. He rushed towards "The Pianist," who was trying to flee to his car.

The Pole pulled out a pistol, but Damien was faster. A blow with the butt of the gun to the jaw sent the resistance fighter sprawling to the ground, coughing up blood and teeth.

Sokolov arrived a second later, placing his heavy boot on the Pole's hand to immobilize him.

— *Welcome to the new Europe*(Welcome to the new Europe), said the Russian with a mocking accent.

Damien opened one of the unloaded crates. Inside, nestled in the foam, were state-of-the-art shaped charges, capable of cutting through a reinforced alloy rail like butter. On the side, a serial number, filed down but still legible to a spectral scanner.

— *Made in Sheffield, UK*Damien said. Damn English. They'll never give up.

"They'll give up when they have no one left to plant their bombs," replied Sokolov, lifting the prisoner by the collar. "Where are we taking him? To the Lubyanka or Levallois?"

"Here," said Damien. "We don't have time for bureaucracy. The AI will do the translation. Get it talking, Viktor. I want to know who their contact in Belgrade is. The train is supposed to go through the Balkans next month; I don't want any unpleasant surprises."

The Russian nodded and dragged the screaming man back inside the dark warehouse. Damien stayed outside in the rain. He lit a cigarette, watching the insurgents' bodies smoking in the cold.

He wasn't proud. But he knew it was necessary. For the citizens of Paris and Moscow to be able to travel at 1000 km/h in air-conditioned tubes, for the economy to prosper, men like him had to do the dirty work in the mud of Warsaw.

His secure phone vibrated. A message from his manager in Paris.

"Is the construction site safe?"

Damien listened to the shouts that were beginning to echo through the warehouse. Viktor was efficient.

He typed his reply.

"The track is clear. The train will pass."

Three days later.

Serbia-Kosovar border.

The Cleansing of the Balkans.

The information obtained in Warsaw was accurate. A "Safe House" in the mountains, financed by an American front NGO.

This time, it wasn't a discreet operation. It was a message.

Two helicopters*Tigre*French soldiers, painted in black and unmarked, emerged from the valley. Their 30mm cannons tore the isolated farmhouse to pieces in seconds. There was no attempt to arrest them.

On a nearby ridge, Damien watched the flames with his binoculars. Next to him, a Serbian liaison officer smiled.

"That's clean," said the Serb. "Thank you for the information. Belgrade will sleep better tonight."

“I’m not doing this for Belgrade,” Damien replied curtly. “It’s for the route. The southern line must be operational by 2035. No more obstacles. No more Americans. No more past.”

He turned towards the transport helicopter that was waiting for them.

— Shall we go back to Paris, Viktor?

The Russian, who was cleaning his knife, shrugged.

— Paris, Moscow... It's all the same house now. As long as there's vodka and the trains run on time.

The helicopter took off, leaving behind a column of black smoke rising into the clear Balkan sky, a sacrificial offering to the god of Logistics and Order. Peace reigned over Europe. A graveyard peace, guarded by wolves.

CHAPTER 10: THE SOUTHERN EXTENSION

February 14, 2034

Algiers, El Mouradia Palace.

The Mediterranean Pact.

The bay of Algiers sparkled under a radiant winter sun. But that morning, the light that bathed the white city was not only that of the sun; it was that of History being written.

On the esplanade of the Presidential Palace, flags snapped in the sea breeze. The green and white flag with the red crescent of Algeria now flew alongside the French Tricolor and the Russian Eagle. An image that, ten years earlier, would have provoked riots, but which today brought tears of pride.

In the Great Hall of Treaties, the Algerian President, a former general with a steely gaze, waited. Facing him were Adrien Montaigne and the Russian Minister of Defense.

There was no more "repentance," no more "painful memory," no more moralizing speeches about the colonial past. There was only the*Realpolitik*and common interests.

"Mr. President," said Montaigne, opening the red leather briefcase. "The terms are clear. Algeria becomes the 'Southern Pillar' of the Alliance."

The Algerian leader nodded. He knew the document by heart.

“We guarantee the security of the Trans-Med pipeline and exclusive access to our ports for the combined fleet,” he recited. “In exchange...”

“In exchange,” the Russian interrupted, “you receive the technology. The SMR (Small Modular Reactors) to desalinate your water and make your desert green. The S-600 defense systems to secure your skies. And the exclusive mandate to maintain peace in the Sahel.”

That was the heart of the deal. Algeria no longer wanted to be a middle power. It wanted to be the regional hegemon. The Alliance was offering it the crown on a silver platter.

"And France?" asked the Algerian, staring at Montaigne.

— France recognizes Algiers' full sovereignty over its sphere of influence. No more interference. No more moralizing about human rights. We're doing business and security. As equals.

The Algerian President took up his pen. It was the end of seventy years of ambiguity. Algeria was choosing its side. Not that of the decadent West, nor that of distant China, but that of a strong Mediterranean.

The signa.

— *Tahia the Alliance*, he murmured.

Three days later.

Mediterranean Sea, off the coast of Toulon.

On board the aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle.

The sea was a deep blue, calm, a sapphire table. But on the surface, it was a terrifying display of power.

Admiral Henri de Castries, now Chief of Staff of the Alliance Navy, observed the maneuvers from the bridge.

In front of him, the*Charles de Gaulle*was not alone. To its right sailed the Russian nuclear cruiser.*Peter the Great*bristling with hypersonic anti-ship missiles. To its left, the new Algerian stealth frigate*El Moudjahid*And beneath the surface, invisible but omnipresent, the attack submarines of the three nations hunted in packs.

— Exclusion zone active, announced the tactical officer.

On radar screens, the Mediterranean appeared as a closed lake. The Strait of Gibraltar was sealed off by French and Moroccan sensors. The Suez Canal was under the guard of Russian and Egyptian ships (new associate members).

A radio message crackled on the international emergency frequency.

"This is the US Navy Destroyer USS Carney. We are requesting permission to transit the Black Sea for the exercise of freedom of navigation."

De Castries took the microphone. His voice was calm, that of the owner of the place.

"Negative, Carney. You are entering an active A2/AD exclusion zone. Your signatures are being acquired by our S-600 fire control systems and the cruiser Pierre le Grand. We will not repeat the warning. Turn immediately to heading 2-7-0. Over."

There was a long silence on the frequency. The American destroyer, once master of the oceans, hesitated. It knew it was being targeted by twelve different vectors. It knew it wouldn't get through.

"Understood. We're turning back."

De Castries put down the microphone. He looked at the horizon. The*Our Sea*The Romans were recreated. No hostile ship could threaten the "Soft Underbelly" of Europe. The sea had become a liquid shield.

March 1, 2034

Dakar, Senegal.

Plateau district.

The shockwave from the Algiers agreement had crossed the Sahara faster than a sandstorm.

Dakar was in turmoil. But it wasn't the anger of the anti-French riots of the 2020s. It was the effervescence of money flowing freely.

In the glass tower of the Central Bank of West African States (BCEAO), the Governor was receiving a delegation from the Alliance.

"The CFA franc is dead," announced the head of the French delegation, a cold technocrat from Bercy.

The Senegalese Governor's eyes widened.

— Are you abandoning us?

— On the contrary. We are raising it. From midnight onwards, your currency will be called the**Eco-Alliance**It will no longer be pegged to the defunct Euro, but indexed to the Continental Bank's Energy-Gold basket.

The technocrat projected a holographic graph. The value curve was skyrocketing.

— In short, Governor: your currency becomes as strong as the Ruble or the New Franc. Your reserves are guaranteed by Russian nuclear power and the French economy. In exchange...

— In exchange?

— Total customs alignment. Priority for Alliance companies for mining, ports, and digital infrastructure. Ban on imports of manufactured goods from outside the Alliance. Africa will be the breadbasket and the mine. Europe will be the factory. It's a division of labor... optimized. And of course, expulsion of American and Turkish military advisors within 48 hours.

The Governor looked out the window. In the port of Dakar, a Russian cargo ship was already unloading turbines for the new power plant, while French engineers were supervising the extension of the secure fiber optic network.

China offered poorly constructed roads in exchange for debt. The Americans offered lessons in democracy and killer drones.

The Alliance offered prosperity and order, in exchange for loyalty.

It was the return of the "Protectorate," certainly. But a rich, powerful, and arrogant protectorate.

"Where do I sign?" asked the Governor.

Francophone Africa did not surrender itself to the Alliance. It integrated itself into it, delighted to find its place in a bloc that no longer apologized for being powerful. From Tangier to the Cape of Good Hope, Anglo-Saxon influence receded like the low tide, giving way to a new era of concrete, steel, and the tricolor flag.

CHAPTER 11: THE STEEL DRAGON

May 1, 2041

Porto, Portugal.

Transcontinental Highway West Terminal.

9:00 AM, local time.

The Atlantic Ocean, grey and restless, came to die against the quays of Porto. For five centuries, these waves had been the route to wealth, the path to the Americas, the vital link of the West.

Today, Adrien Montaigne, his hair now as white as sea foam, turned his back on the ocean.

Before him, plunging into the land, lay the future. A tubular structure of white concrete and armored glass, semi-buried, which ran eastward like a silver artery.

The West Terminal was not a train station. It was a land-based spaceport.

On platform number 1, the beast waited. It was called "The Eurasian," or more commonly "The Steel Dragon." It wasn't a train. It was a magnetic levitation capsule traveling in a partially vacuum tube (*Vactrain*). Without air friction, without wheel friction, propelled by the unlimited electricity of fusion reactors, it could reach a cruising speed of 2,000 km/h.

Montaigne adjusted his coat. At his side stood the Chinese President, Chen Min, the new Helmsman of Beijing, and the Russian President.

"Look at the ocean one last time, Adrien," said the Russian with a wry smile. "It's become a dead end."

"It's a border," Montaigne corrected. "And we're on the right side."

They boarded the boat.

The interior was incredibly luxurious, a blend of Italian design (Milan had done a great job) and Korean technology. Transparent Samsung screens replaced windows, because at that speed, the real landscape would be nothing but a blur of colors.

— *Airlock closures*, announced the gentle voice of the AI Mistral.*Tube pressurization. Departure in thirty seconds. Destination: Shanghai-Pudong. Estimated travel time: 14 hours and 12 minutes.*

A shiver ran down Montaigne's spine. Fourteen hours. It took a container ship thirty days to make this journey by sea, paying exorbitant insurance and fearing the American navy.

The train lurched into motion. No jolt. Just a heightened sense of weight as the

acceleration gently pinned them to their leather seats.

1:00 PM (Paris time).

Somewhere south of Bavaria.

Vitesse : 1 850 km/h.

In the bar car, Hélène Darcier, who had become the Alliance's Minister of Economy, was chatting with Samsung CEO Lee Jae-yong.

On the table, between the champagne glasses, there were electronic chips.

"This marks the end of just-in-time maritime shipping," explained Hélène, pointing to the speedometer. "Your factories in Seoul produce on Mondays. By Tuesday evening, these chips are installed in our Renaults and Airbuses in Lyon and Toulouse."

The Korean businessman nodded.

— The Americans are pressuring us to continue using the Panama Canal and their cargo ships. They talk about "freedom of navigation".

“Freedom is time,” retorted Helen. “Why would you put your chips on slow ships, vulnerable to storms and US Navy blockades, when you have this tube? Here, it’s secured by the FSB, it’s immune to the weather, and it costs ten times less in energy.”

Lee Jae-yong smiled. He was a pragmatic man.

— Korea is a peninsula, Madam Minister. But thanks to this train, we are no longer an island. We are the gateway to Eurasia. The contracts are signed. Samsung is shifting 80% of its freight to rail.

Hélène raised her glass.

— At the death of the Atlantic.

8:00 PM (Moscow time).

Crossing the Urals.

Montaigne looked at the window-screen. The AI projected a soothing image of the snowy steppes, but he knew they were crossing the Russian night at the speed of a rifle bullet.

The Russian President joined him.

— Do you know what that means, Adrien?

— Yes. Mackinder was right.

— *"Whoever controls the Heartland controls the World Island. Whoever controls the World Island controls the World."*

The Russian pointed to the ground beneath their feet.

— For a century, the Anglo-Saxons dominated because they controlled the seas. They could starve anyone with a blockade. But how can you blockade a continent that is self-sufficient?

"We cannot," said Montaigne.

— Exactly. Their aircraft carriers have become floating museums. They can patrol the Atlantic as much as they want. Trade no longer passes through there. Wealth circulates here, underground, safely, between us.

04:00 (Shanghai Time).

Arrival at the East Terminal.

The braking was as smooth as the departure. The "Steel Dragon" glided into Shanghai's futuristic station, under a huge glass dome where the flags of China, Russia, France and all the partner countries were flying.

A huge crowd was waiting. Not protesters, but consumers, students, entrepreneurs.

When the doors opened, the hot, humid air of Asia rushed into the cabin. Adrien Montaigne was the first to step out onto the platform.

He had left the Atlantic at breakfast. He was having dinner on the Pacific.

In front of him were standardized containers, marked with the seal*ALLIANCE RAIL FREIGHT*were already being unloaded by autonomous robots at a breakneck pace. Bordeaux wines, German machine tools, and Lyon pharmaceuticals were being shipped to flood the Chinese market. In the opposite direction, rare earth elements, batteries, and electronic components were waiting to be loaded for Europe.

It was a continuous ballet. An artificial blood flow that rendered the heart of the world invulnerable.

An American journalist, one of the few accredited, held a microphone out towards Montaigne.

— Mr. President, Washington calls this inauguration an "Iron Wall" that isolates the free world. What is your response?

Montaigne smiled. He looked at the silver train, then at the Asian crowd, then at his Russian partners.

— I reply that Washington has an old map, sir. There is no wall. There is just a bridge. And you stayed on the other side.

He turned on his heel. The party was starting. And for the first time since 1945, America wasn't invited.

CHAPTER 12: QUEBEC'S CALL

June 24, 2042

Montreal, Quebec.

Place des Festivals.

10:00 PM, Saint John the Baptist Day.

The air was electric, charged with a fervor that Quebec hadn't seen since the failed referendums of the last century. But tonight, the issue wasn't just independence. It was survival.

A sea of blue and white flooded the city center. Hundreds of thousands of faces were turned towards the giant screens, awaiting the verdict of the ballot boxes. Amidst the fleur-de-lis flags, French tricolors and the purple banner of the Alliance were seen waving.

On stage, the Premier of Quebec, a young charismatic orator named Guillaume Lemay, stepped up to the microphone. He raised his arms, asking for silence.

"My friends," he began, his voice breaking with emotion. "Tonight, the world is watching us. Tonight, we have chosen our destiny."

The numbers appeared in letters of fire behind him:**YES: 68%**.

An immense clamor rose to the sky, making the windows of the skyscrapers on Sainte-Catherine Street tremble.

"The people of Quebec have spoken!" roared Lemay. "We accept France's offer of protection! We join the Francophone Prosperity Zone! We are no longer an isolated province of a declining Anglophone empire. We are the Alliance's bridgehead in America!"

600 kilometers to the south, the celebration was not taking place.

June 25, 2042

Washington D.C., The White House.

Situation Room.

06h00.

The President of the United States, John Miller, an isolationist populist elected on the promise of "Fortress America", was banging his fist on the table.

"They're mocking us!" he yelled. "French troops sixty kilometers from Plattsburgh? That's a direct violation of the Monroe Doctrine! No foreign powers in the Western Hemisphere!"

General Campbell, Chief of the Defence Staff, tried to calm things down.

— Mr. President, technically, Quebec voted democratically. And France is a historic ally, a member of NATO... well, what's left of it.

"France is Moscow's Trojan horse!" Miller interrupted, foaming at the mouth. "If we let the French settle in Montreal, the Russians will follow. Tomorrow, we'll have missiles."*Zircon*pointed at New York from Mount Royal and Russian nuclear submarines in the St. Lawrence River. This is unacceptable. This is existential.

He turned to his Secretary of Defense.

— Mobilize the 10th Mountain Division. Deploy the Vermont and New York National Guard. Close the border. And send an ultimatum to Paris and Quebec: cancel this vote, or we'll enter.

— Sir, invading Canada... that's North American civil war.

— A civil war is better than a Russian base on our doorstep. Execute!

June 26, 2042

North Atlantic Ocean.

On board the amphibious helicopter carrier Mistral.

Admiral de Castries, aged but still as upright as ever, was reading the dispatch from Washington. He was standing on the bridge of the*Mistral*, flagship of the "Task Force Lafayette" which was steaming at full speed towards the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Beside him, the General commanding the Foreign Legion observed the grey horizon.

"The Americans are massing armored vehicles at Lacolle and Stanstead," said the General. "Are they bluffing?"

"Miller isn't bluffing," de Castries replied. "He's afraid. And fear makes men dangerous. He thinks we're bringing the Red Army."

De Castries took the secure phone connected to the Élysée Palace. Adrien Montaigne was on the line.

— Mr. President, we are approaching Newfoundland. The American Atlantic Fleet is leaving Norfolk to intercept us.

— *What is your composition, Admiral?*asked Montaigne's voice, calm but tense.

— Only French, sir. The*Mistral*Two air defense frigates, and three regiments: the 2nd Foreign Parachute Regiment (2nd REP), the 3rd Marine Infantry Regiment (3rd RIMa), and

the 1st Spahis Regiment. Not a single Russian. Not a single advisor, not a single cook, not a single Russian-caliber bullet.

— *Perfect. Stay the course. If the US Navy blocks your path, don't fire first. But warn them.*

— And the Russians?

— *Putin assured me that his Yasen-class submarines are submerged 50 nautical miles behind you. Invisible. If the Americans fire on the French flag... they'll get a response from the Alliance.*

De Castries hung up. He looked at his officers.

"Hoist the great flag," he ordered. "I want them to see the blue, white, and red from the moon. We're playing the Lafayette card."

June 27, 2042

Quebec-United States border.

Saint-Bernard-de-Lacolle border post.

The silence was deafening.

On one side of the barrier, American M1A3 Abrams tanks, engines roaring, guns pointed north. Thousands of National Guard soldiers, nervous, fingers on the trigger.

On the other side, no heavy tanks. Just French VBCIs (Infantry Fighting Vehicles), painted in UN colors but with the French flag on the turret. And men.

The Legionnaires of the 2nd Foreign Parachute Regiment. They weren't hiding. They were standing there, green berets firmly on their heads, calmly smoking cigarettes, looking at the Americans with the quiet arrogance of elite troops who have seen worse.

In the middle of the border bridge, a Legion Captain stepped forward, alone and unarmed. He was holding a megaphone.

Opposite him, an American colonel got out of his Humvee. His name,**Stryker**, was stenciled in black on his tactical vest.

— *This is Colonel Stryker, US Army*", yelled the American.*You are violating North American sovereignty. Turn back or we will open fire.*

The French Captain smiled. He raised the megaphone to his lips. His English was impeccable, tinged with that indefinable accent of the Legion.

— This is Captain D'Artois. We are here at the invitation of the sovereign government of Quebec. We are a Francophone peacekeeping force. Take a good look at our uniforms,

Colonel.

He spread his arms wide.

"There are no Russians here. Just the descendants of Rochambeau and Lafayette. Are you going to fire on the allies who helped found your country? Are you going to start World War III for a democratic vote?"

Colonel Stryker hesitated. He looked at his men. Many had their eyes downcast. Shooting at "Commies" or terrorists was one thing. Shooting at Frenchmen was shooting at history.

In his earpiece, Stryker could hear the Pentagon shouting contradictory orders. But his sensors were telling him something else. Something terrifying.

Off the coast of New York and Boston, magnetic anomalies had just appeared. "Black holes" in the ocean. Russian submarines. They were there. They said nothing, but their presence screamed:*"Touch the French language, and you die."*

Colonel Stryker spat on the ground. He waved his hand.

— Stand down (Repos).

The guns of the Abrams tanks rose slightly.

On the bridge, Captain D'Artois lit another cigarette. Quebec would not be invaded tonight. The border held. The Alliance had just won its first battle on American soil without firing a single shot.

CHAPTER 13: THE RED LINE

June 27, 2042

Quebec-Vermont border.

Saint-Bernard-de-Lacolle post.

07h30.

The sun rose on a scene that defied imagination. On one side, the raw mechanical power of America: rows of Abrams tanks, Apache helicopters circling in the distance. On the other, a thin, almost insignificant line of French light armored vehicles.*Jaguar* And *Griffon*.

Between the two, a*No Man's Land*one hundred meters of asphalt.

Captain D'Artois, of the 2nd Foreign Parachute Regiment (2nd REP), crushed out his third cigarette. He knew that the American snipers had his head in their sights for an hour. He also knew that they wouldn't fire.

— *My Captain*his radio crackled.*Echo sector movement. Colonel Stryker gets out of his vehicle.*

The American officer advanced to the center line alone. He had removed his helmet. He looked exhausted, furious, but resigned. D'Artois stepped forward to meet him.

The two men faced each other, a meter apart. History was watching them.

"I received orders from Washington," Stryker growled. "We are maintaining the defensive position. But if a single one of your legionnaires sets foot on New York State soil, we will turn this border post into a parking lot."

“We are not invaders, Colonel,” replied D’Artois calmly. “We are guests. Quebec is a French-speaking sanctuary. As long as you stay home, we stay home.”

Stryker looked over the Frenchman's shoulder. He saw the tricolour flag flying over the Canadian customs building. He spat on the ground.

— Lafayette must be turning in his grave.

— On the contrary, Colonel. He would be proud. We are protecting the freedom of a people. Isn't that what you taught us?

Same time.

North Atlantic Ocean.

Off the coast of Long Island (International Waters).

The sea was like oil. The US Navy's coastal surveillance radars, based at Montauk, nervously scanned the horizon. They were searching for the Russian fleet. They were searching for thousands of ships.

They saw only one anomaly.

Twenty-two kilometers off the American coast, right at the edge of territorial waters, the ocean suddenly bulged. A mountain of black water surged from the depths with a roar of foam.

It wasn't a surface vessel. It was the Leviathan.

The 3rd generation SSBN (Nuclear-Powered Ballistic Missile Submarine)*The Vigilant*It broke the surface. Its immense black hull gleamed in the sun. It did nothing hostile. It simply floated there, silent, visible from the beaches of the Hamptons.

A hatch on the kiosk opened. A sailor climbed aboard and hoisted a giant flag.

Blue. White. Red.

It wasn't an attack. It was a signature. France was saying to America:*"I'm here. I'm alone. But I can wipe you off the map."*

The White House, Washington D.C.

Situation Room.

8:00 a.m.

The silence in the crisis room was deathly. On the main screen, the satellite image of the French submarine off the coast of New York was looping.

President Miller was pale.

"They dare to challenge us on our own soil?" he murmured. "Sink him. Send a Virginia-class attack submarine and sink that bastard."

The Chief of Staff, General Campbell, placed a trembling hand on the President's arm.

— Sir, we cannot.

— Why? We have naval superiority!

— Look at the sonar sensors, sir.

The admiral revealed a new layer of data on the map. Around the*Vigilant*In the deep waters, five other phantom signatures had just appeared. They didn't fly their flags, but their acoustic signature was inimitable.

Class*lassen-M*Russia.

"The Russians are here," Campbell explained, his voice trembling.**They used the*Vigilant*as acoustic masking. The noise of the French submarine masked their own. It's an old Soviet tactic, but executed to perfection.**They are escorting the French submarine. If we fire on the French one, the five Russians will retaliate. They have hypersonic missiles.*Zircon*tactical nuclear warhead. Flight time to Washington: 3 minutes.

Miller slumped into his chair. It was the perfect trap.

France was the respectable showcase, the diplomacy, the flag.

Russia was the hidden muscle, the invisible bodyguard in the shadows.

"They've got us," the President blurted out.

The red telephone rang. It was the direct Paris-Washington line.

Miller looked at the receiver as if it were a venomous snake. He finally picked up the phone.

— This is Miller.

— *Mr. President*, said Adrien Montaigne's voice, fluid, almost friendly.*I believe it's time to de-escalate.*

— You have a nuclear submarine off the coast of New York, Adrien! That's an act of war!

— *It's a courtesy visit. A state visit. My ship will depart as soon as you recognize Quebec's protectorate status.*

— And if I refuse?

— *So we'll stay. And trade will stop. No more rare earths for your Silicon Valley. No more uranium for your power plants. No more medicine for your hospitals. We'll turn off the tap, John. Your economy will last two weeks. Mine will last a hundred years.*

This was the reality of the new world. The threat was no longer even military; it was logistical. America had become an island dependent on the Eurasian continent for its technological survival.

Miller closed his eyes. He thought about the midterm elections. He thought about inflation. He thought about history.

"Very well," he said. "Withdraw your submarine. We recognize the result of the Quebec referendum. But not a single soldier south of the 45th parallel."

— *This is a border of peace, John. No one will cross it. Have a good day.*

The line cut out.

Miller looked at his generals.

— Call Stryker back. Tell him to turn around.

Quebec-Vermont border.

10:00 a.m.

The roar of American diesel engines ripped through the air. The Abrams tanks turned around, their tracks crunching on the asphalt, heading back south.

Captain D'Artois watched the cloud of dust drift away. He took out one last cigarette, but his lighter was no longer working.

An outstretched hand appeared before him, holding a silver Zippo lighter.

D'Artois turned around. It was a Spetsnaz officer, in civilian clothes, who had appeared out of nowhere, smiling. He had no right to be there, officially.

— *Good job*(Good work), said the Russian.

D'Artois lit his cigarette and handed back the lighter.

— Thank you. But please don't appear in the photos. This is a French operation.

The Russian blinked and disappeared into the crowd of arriving journalists.

Captain D'Artois looked up at the Quebec flag, now flying freely. The Red Line had been drawn. North America was no longer a monolithic bloc. The Eurasian Empire had just set foot on the New World, and the New World had lowered its gaze.

CHAPTER 14: THE DIGITAL CITADEL

October 14, 2043

Lyon, Confluence district (Biotech Valley).

07h30.

Alexandre Vernet opened his eyes before his alarm even went off. The light in his room, filtered through smart glass, mimicked natural dawn for an optimal hormonal awakening.

He sat on the edge of the bed and placed his wrist on the scanner on his nightstand.

— *Hello Alexandre*, says the soft voice of Mistral, the domestic AI integrated into the apartment.*Morning analysis complete. Low cortisol levels. Optimal oxygenation. I detected minor liver inflammation due to yesterday's dinner. Your bioprinter has synthesized the fix.*

A small green capsule emerged from a discreet crack in the wall. Alexander swallowed it with a glass of water. He didn't even think about it anymore. Cancer, diabetes, chronic illnesses... those were ancient history. Lyon's "Biotech Valley," financed by billions from the Phoenix Plan and fueled by Russian fundamental research, had turned health into an exact, predictive science.

He stood up and looked out the window. The Rhône flowed majestically, bordered by futuristic buildings covered in vegetation. In the distance, one could make out the harmless plumes of steam from the cooling towers of quantum data centers.

Alexander was not a soldier. He was not a politician. He was a cryptography engineer at**Infomaniak-Quantum**, the sovereign cloud giant. And today, he was supposed to go to the "Vault".

10:00 a.m.

Geneva, Switzerland.

Underground Data Center "Le Lac".

150 meters below Lake Geneva.

The regional magnetic train took twenty-five minutes to travel from Lyon to Geneva.

Alexandre passed through the security checkpoints. No body search, just biometric and... psychological authentication. Neural sensors verified that he was not under duress.

He entered the Sanctuary.

It was a cathedral of glass and blue light, immersed in the icy water of the lake to cool the processors. Here beat the digital heart of the Alliance. The health data of 800 million

Europeans and Russians, the plans for fusion reactors, the transactions of the New Franc... it was all there.

Alexander returned to his control station. His colleague, a Russian mathematician named Dimitri, was eating an apple while watching lines of code scroll by in 3D.

"Is it quiet?" asked Alexandre.

"Too calm," replied Dimitri. "The Americans are nervous. Since the Quebec debacle, the NSA has been aggressive. They're scanning our ports of entry every millisecond."

Alexandre sat down and connected his neural interface. He "saw" the network. It wasn't the chaotic internet of the 2020s. It was a perfect, crystalline structure, protected by QKD (Quantum Key Distribution) encryption.

Suddenly, the crystal turned red.

A silent alarm, perceived only by connected operators, screamed in their minds.

— *INTRUSION ALERT*, announced Mistral, his voice changing from a domestic to a martial mode.*Massive attack using quantum saturation and a modified Shor algorithm. They are attempting to factor the banking sector's public key. Traced origin: Fort Meade, Maryland. Signature: Tailored Access Operations (NSA).*

"They're going all out," Dimitri hissed. "They're using the full computing power of their supercomputer 'Excalibur'. They're trying to break the encryption by brute force."

Alexander did not panic. He watched the attack as one watches a wave break on a granite cliff.

The Americans were using silicon computers, pushed to their extreme limits. They were trying to factor gigantic prime numbers by brute force.

But the Alliance used**Qubits**.

"Activate the Mirror," Alexander ordered.

Dimitri typed in an order.

The "Quantum Shield" sprang into action. Instead of blocking the attack, the Alliance system used quantum entanglement. The attack was absorbed, analyzed, and instantly sent back to its sender with a polymorphic viral payload.

Same time.

Fort Meade, Maryland, United States.

QG de la NSA.

The screens in the cybernetic war room all went dark at the same time.

"What's going on?" yelled the Director of Operations. "Have we lost the connection?"

"It's... it's a backlash, Chief!" stammered an analyst. "Our firewalls are melting. The virus is penetrating our defenses as if they didn't exist. It's rewriting the BIOS of our servers!"

Sparks flew from a server rack. The smell of ozone and burning plastic filled the room. The emergency cooling system kicked in with a cacophony of sirens.

On the main screen, which had survived, a message appeared in pixelated green letters, in French, Russian and English.

"ACCESS DENIED."

YOUR TECHNOLOGY IS OBSOLETE.

THIS IS A WARNING.

NEXT TIME, WE WILL ERASE YOUR DEBT... AND YOUR BANK ACCOUNTS.

— L'ALLIANCE »

The NSA Director stared at his black screens. He had just lost ten years' worth of data in ten seconds. They were like children playing with sticks against gods armed with lightning.

12h00.

Geneva.

Alexandre removed his interface. He had a slight headache, quickly relieved by a tap on his watch.

"Is it over?" he asked.

"They're in the dark," Dimitri confirmed with a laugh. "It's going to take them weeks to reboot their critical systems."

"They'll never understand," sighed Alexander. "They still think in terms of 'firepower.' They haven't grasped that matter has changed state."

He got up. It was lunchtime. He had planned to eat with his wife, who was arriving from Milan on the midday train for a shopping trip to Geneva.

He left the bunker. The Alpine air was pure. Lake Geneva sparkled. Sailboats glided peacefully on the water.

Alexandre looked at his phone. A notification from his bank: his salary had just been paid in

gold francs. His purchasing power allowed him to live like a king.

He felt free.

Free from illness.

Free from the fear of tomorrow.

Free from the American surveillance that had poisoned the beginning of the century.

Of course, he knew that the DGSI was probably reading his emails, and that Mistral was analyzing his dreams. But that was the price of the pact. A pact he renewed every morning without hesitation.

He walked towards the station, an anonymous citizen of the world's leading power, while on the other side of the Atlantic, a fallen superpower was desperately trying to turn its computers back on.

CHAPTER 15: PAX EURASIATICA

July 14, 2045

Paris, Avenue des Champs-Élysées.

10:00. The Victory Parade.

The sky over Paris was a perfect blue, cleared by climate drones that had been patrolling since dawn. The July heat was tempered by giant misting systems installed along the most beautiful avenue in the world.

But it wasn't the usual Bastille Day crowd. It wasn't a national holiday. It was an imperial mass.

Adrien Montaigne stood in the presidential box at the Place de la Concorde. His hair was now as white as snow, his face etched by the crushing responsibilities of a decade and a half of rule. He leaned lightly on the railing, feeling the weight of history on his stooped shoulders.

To his right, Vladimir Putin. He too had aged, but he retained that unalterable rigidity, that sphinx-like gaze that had weathered the storms of the century.

"Look at them, Adrien," murmured the Russian, pointing to the Arc de Triomphe. "They don't walk. They flow like a river."

The music of the Republican Guard, amplified by holographic speakers, resonated throughout Paris. But it wasn't just playing music.*The Marseillaise*She played a new symphonic march, fusing French brass and Red Army choirs.

The troops were arriving.

At the head of the line, the Foreign Legion, with its slow step and axes, the bearded pioneers leading the way.

Just behind, marching in step, was the elite Guards Spetsnaz regiment, in black and gold ceremonial uniforms.

Then came the battalions of the "Protectorate": the Quebec Blue Helmets, greeted by an ovation from the crowd.

Followed by the Algerian marine troops, proud pillars of the South.

It was a world army. A composite force that held Eurasia and Africa in its iron grip.

"Do you remember 2032?" asked Montaigne, without taking his eyes off the soldiers. "They called us monsters. They said we were going to destroy civilization."

“We saved it from itself,” Putin replied. “Europe wanted to commit suicide out of pride. We put it under guardianship so that it would survive. Look at Berlin today. It’s a rich city. They don’t have a vote on the Security Council, that’s true. But they have heating, jobs, and peace. Isn’t that what people really want? Bread and circuses?”

A rumbling sound in the sky made the ground tremble.

The mixed air patrol flew past. The plumes of smoke no longer simply formed the tricolour flag. They formed the Phoenix of the Alliance, gold and purple, in the sky over Paris.

Rafale F6s, Sukhoi Su-75 "Checkmate" aircraft and the new Neuro-n heavy combat drones flew wing-to-wing, synchronized by the Mistral AI.

Montaigne looked at the crowd. Millions of people. French, of course, but also tourists from all over the Empire. They waved flags. They smiled. They seemed happy. Had they forgotten the chaotic freedom of the past? Or had they willingly exchanged it for this absolute security, this technological prosperity, this perfect health guaranteed by the State?

"Freedom is a Western illusion, Adrien," said the Russian, as if he could read his thoughts. "Order is the only reality."

A group of German and Italian officers, integrated into the logistics corps, passed in front of the reviewing stand. They saluted, looking straight ahead. They had accepted their fate. They were the managers of the European province, and that was enough for them.

Montaigne thought back to the armored train in the Alps, thirteen years earlier. To the nausea he had felt upon signing the pact. That nausea had vanished. It had been replaced by a cold certainty.

He was right.

He turned his head toward the United States Ambassador, relegated to the third row of protocol, sandwiched between the representatives of Brazil and India. The American watched the parade with a mixture of fascination and terror. He knew that his country, hemmed in by its two oceans, was now nothing more than a giant island, rich but alone, disconnected from the heart of the world.

"We have built a modern Rome, Vladimir," said Montaigne.

"Better than Rome," the Russian corrected. "Rome eventually fell. We have Fusion and Quantum. We will not fall."

The parade was drawing to a close. The last floats*Army-Leclerc*They passed the Place de la Concorde. The music faded to make way for the Alliance anthem.

Adrien Montaigne straightened his stooped figure. He stared at the horizon, towards the

East, where the rails of the Steel Dragon sped towards Moscow and Beijing.

He had sacrificed his honor to save his people.

He had killed the European ideal in order to build an imperial reality.

He had betrayed his allies to find stronger ones.

If he had to do it again, he would sign again.

He shook hands with his Russian counterpart to the cheers of the crowd.

It was July 14, 2045.

The war was over.

Peace reigned.

A heavy, armed, monitored, brilliant and implacable peace.

The *Eurasian Peace*.

EPILOGUE: THE RED PASSPORT

September 12, 2046

Dubai International Airport.

Terminal 3 - Zone de Transit Global.

8:15 a.m.

Dubai airport was still the crossroads of the world, a glass and steel anthill where all nations met. But the geography of the queues had changed.

At the counter**A**A dense crowd was milling about. British tourists, South American businessmen, and above all, Americans. They held their blue passports with the bald eagle with visible anxiety.

A young American man, in his thirties, wearing a wrinkled shirt, was trying to negotiate with the Emirati immigration officer.

"Listen, my visa is valid; I applied electronically three weeks ago! It's just that my Wells Fargo credit card got blocked because of the new sanctions on the dollar..."

The officer didn't even look up from his screen.

— Rejected. Without a bank guarantee in gold or New Francs, you will not be allowed back in. Repatriation queue number 4. Next.

The American, red with shame and frustration, gathered his luggage under the annoyed stares of the queue. He turned and saw, on the other side of the hall, the ticket window.**B**.

There was no queue at the ticket office.**B**Just a red carpet and a biometric gate that glowed with a soft green light.

A golden sign displayed the following information in three languages (Arabic, French, Russian):

CITIZENS OF THE ALLIANCE & STRATEGIC PARTNERS.

A man in his forties, dressed in an impeccable linen suit, walked towards the portico. It was Alexandre Vernet. He was holding a small notebook in his hand.

It wasn't the old burgundy passport of the European Union. It was a document of a deep, almost blood-red color, textured like Russian leather.

On the cover, embossed in gold lettering, one did not read "French Republic" or "Russian Federation". One read:

EURASIAN CONTINENTAL UNION

Liberty - Order - Prosperity

At the center, the emblem struck the imagination: the Russian Double-Headed Eagle, but with one of its heads replaced by the proud profile of the Gallic Rooster, all surmounting the reborn Phoenix.

Alexandre didn't even stop. He simply placed the passport on the kiosk.

A harmonious beep sounded.

— *Welcome to Dubai, Mr. Vernet*", said a warm, synthetic voice.*Your Alliance-Platinum status has been recognized. Access to the VIP lounge is reserved for you. Your transfer to the maglev train to Shanghai is confirmed.*

The American watched the scene, dumbfounded. He saw Alexandre put away his red passport with aristocratic nonchalance. He saw the Emirati customs officers greet the Frenchman with a respect once reserved for kings or envoys from Washington.

Alexandre met the American's gaze. He read weariness, envy, and total incomprehension. The American seemed to be wondering how the world could have turned so fast without him noticing.

Alexander didn't smile mockingly. Just a polite, almost compassionate nod. He knew this man was paying for his ancestors' blindness.

He crossed the portico, entering the air-conditioned, fragrant, silent area.

Outside, on the tarmac, a hypersonic aircraft in Air France-Aeroflot colors was preparing to take off towards the East, towards the rising sun, towards the heart of the world.

The West had surrendered.

Eurasia had risen.

And in Alexander's pocket, the small red passport weighed the weight of an empire.

END.